



1, 5 Black Bird Bar & Grill. 2 David Murphy, Nina Alidenes and RJ Lines. 3 One Penny Red. 4 Cho Cho San. 6 Sam Christie, Nicholas Wong and Jonathan Barthelmess.



# Start me up

With celebrity chef Manu Feidel closing down his Melbourne restaurant Le Grand Cirque just four months after opening it begs the question just what does it take to make a new venture turn a buck, asks Sheridan Randall.

Screenwriting legend William Goldman famously said of the movie business “nobody knows anything” when it came to predicting whether a movie would make any money. The same could be said of the hospitality business. Feidel’s *My Kitchen Rules* fame and the deep pockets and know-how of the Made Establishment Group were no guarantee of success when it came to his long cherished dream of launching Le Grand Cirque. With the threat of build it and they won’t come hovering over every new venture big and small it is a wonder anyone sees the whole thing through.

Restaurateur Sam Christie stepped out earlier this year with new Sydney restaurant Cho Cho San in Potts Point. Christie co-owns the Longrain Sydney and Longrain Melbourne as well as the Greek-inspired taverna The Apollo, partnering with The Apollo chef Jonathan Barthelmess to open their take on modern Japanese

cuisine. The new restaurant sits in a space that has variously been home to Shogun, Osteria Moana and Paramount, prior to its latest Zen-like incarnation, and is located in the same neighbourhood as The Apollo. “For a restaurant to work, the location is a vital part of the process,” Christie says. “It is important to understand the customer you are targeting and the overall atmosphere you hope to achieve as both will be impacted by the choice of location.”

Having Barthelmess at his side and sourcing Nicholas Wong (from Billy Kwong) as head chef eased the pain of finding a good kitchen team, but that is only one of many steps along the long and winding road to opening night.

“There are an infinite numbers of steps before committing to any venture,” Christie says. “Top of the list is securing a great team, having a solid concept, right location and of course all the financing must be in place

before committing to any new launch.”

However, it is those factors that have to be left to others that can cause the most grief.

“Probably the worst process of launching a new venture is going through the building or renovating process,” he says. “Some tradesmen don’t have a sense of urgency which can trickle down to launching later than expected.”

Nowadays getting the word out about a new venue starts well before the doors open.

“Social media is a large focus for us and is how we communicate with our customers on a daily basis,” he says. “Prior to opening Cho Cho San, we launched our Instagram and Facebook pages, asking the online community to join us in the countdown to the launch. This generated a lot of excitement within the industry and among diners with some of our existing customers spreading the news via their own channels.”

Cho Cho San marks Christie’s fourth new venue, and with each opening “it does get a little easier each time”.

“Every restaurant is different,” he says. “The main elements are usually the same; however the creative process for each individual venue requires a lot of involvement.

“You never know if a venture will succeed or not. You have to back yourself and your own concept throughout the whole process and be willing to take a risk!”

Chris Lucas is no stranger to opening nights with the opening of Korean hybrid BBQ joint Kong hoping to replicate the success of Melbourne’s Chin Chin, which is recognised as one of the most successful

restaurants in Australia at the moment.

“Two key steps are a lease to secure a site and necessary approvals like council and liquor licence,” he says. “Once these are secured then everything begins in terms of design and concept development.”

With location still a major factor in the decision making process, unless “you’re a destination restaurant then it’s not super critical”, the next step is getting the right team together.

“Culture and attitude of the individual is perhaps the most important consideration for me,” he says. “It’s usually accepted that the chef has the skills and talent but we always look for team oriented well

balanced leaders.”

Generating publicity “tends to happen organically as our brands are well known”, with Lucas using a mixture of social media and traditional media to get the word out.

Citing “the stress and the unknown” as the two worst things about launching a new venture, Lucas says that at the end of the day no one ever knows if it will succeed. And it doesn’t get any easier.

“Each one for us up until now has been a totally different concept,” he says. “Each site and restaurant is very unique and has its own challenges.”

For Nehme Ghanem, managing director of the Ghanem Group, it’s “location, location,

**YOUR NATURAL CHOICE.**

GRASS FED | FREE RANGE | HORMONE FREE | ANTIBIOTIC FREE

AUSTRALIAN **grasslands** PREMIUM BEEF

For more information contact: **WARREN PAYNE** P 02 49201944 E [warrenp@teysaust.com.au](mailto:warrenp@teysaust.com.au) [facebook.com/grasslandsbeef](https://facebook.com/grasslandsbeef)



1, 4 Cho Cho San. 2 Black Bird Bar & Grill. 3 Kong.

See recipe in the Open House iPad app.

location” when it comes to new venues. With stunning views of the Brisbane River and Story Bridge, the group’s latest venture, Black Bird Bar & Grill, has hit the ground running, which must come as some relief after forking out almost \$2 million to fit it out and lure top chef Jake Nicolson (formerly of Circa) to helm the kitchen. “Location can make or break a venue,” says Ghanem. “I’ve seen cafes and restaurants in a precinct close down because they are in the wrong side of precinct. You can pick up the shop, move it down 30 metres and it would be a huge success.”

Black Bird is the fifth venue in the group’s stable that includes Byblos Brisbane, Byblos Melbourne, 5<sup>th</sup> Element, and Baba Ganouj, and was the least stressful to launch with the experience gained over the years, according to Ghanem.

“For me it gets a little easier with each venue,” he says. “When we started eight years ago with Byblos Bar & Restaurant Brisbane, it was my brother Adonis and I who did everything from creating a concept through to hiring and managing staff and everything in between. As each venue opened we slowly hired the right people in management position to oversee the day to day operations and help with the setup of each business. Now our group

has an executive chef, general manager, bar manager, events and marketing manager, [and] head sommelier who oversee all the day to day operations and set up which gives my brother and I more time to work on concept designs and fine tuning each venue.”

Though the advantages multiple venues reap rewards on the experience front, there also comes the added burden of juggling the finances.

“Opening a new venture is not cheap and the financial stress can be quite daunting as you are spending a lot of money with no immediate return,” he says. “When owning multiple venues it can be detrimental to their operations, as bills take longer to be paid you run the risk of having suppliers put you on hold which in turn leads to you being out of stock on menu items – never a good thing.”

The group employs a public relations agent, with each of the venues posting on Instagram and Facebook on a regular basis to spread the word.

“The internet and social media play a massive role in the hospitality industry, it would be foolish not to take advantage of it,” he says.

Ghanem concedes that you can never be 100 per cent certain a new venture will succeed, but maintains that “you must

trust your judgment and commit yourself to the cause”.

“When we opened Byblos in Melbourne it took over 18 months of hard work and no profit before we could say this is working,” he says. “However, Black Bird in Brisbane opened up with a bang [and is] going from strength to strength. I knew from day one Black Bird was going to work.”

Located in a historic post office building in Sydney’s Summer Hill, One Penny Red was brought to fruition following a series of snatched two minute conversations with one of the customers at co-owner Nina Alidenes’ previous venture, Envy Café, which was just down the road.

The building’s owner had a long cherished dream of seeing it turned into a restaurant, and for Alidenes it was case of an opportunity too good to refuse. Along with her partner David Murphy, they set about bringing the dream to life.

“I know what I like to do and I know what I am good at and I was just presented with this building,” she says.

Having launched four businesses of her own, and with a swag of restaurant set-ups under her belt, Alidenes has experience aplenty but concedes “it is never easy”.

“It’s very stressful and I always say I never

want to do it again,” she says.

The site itself required a total renovation over its two floors, and with that a detailed business plan outlining every cost.

“I spent months negotiating the lease,” she says. “If you don’t get that right you really don’t have a business.

“With this site there was no way that this would sustain itself as a BYO business. It has two floors which is great but it also means it is a high wage cost as it is two separate rooms.”

Alidenes and Murphy approached RJ Lines (formerly of Neutral Bay Diner) to head up the kitchen some 18 months prior to opening but it was only much later when the duo could sit down and show Lines detailed plans that things fell into place. Some cooking sessions at home sealed the deal. However, it wasn’t just culinary skills Lines brought to the table, but his following in the media.

“He is a very well liked chef,” says Alidenes. “Industry people knew we were doing this but we just needed to get it out to the general public and that is where we found social media really helpful.”

The venue’s team includes a social media

manager to help spread the word.

“Publicity is huge and is very different to how it was,” she says. “When I opened my first restaurant there was no iPhone, there was ‘I nothing’. My first business nearly went bust after six months due to lack of publicity. Word of mouth in 1999 was much slower and what social media has done is give us instant exposure. I set up an Instagram account [before opening] and had followers before I had even posted a photo. Then there is Twitter and Facebook.”

One Penny Red got immediate coverage across all the media channels, with Alidenes saying they “were very surprised at the level of attention we generated”.

“We’re very aware that the first stage of the business is to make that solid impression and that impression is what we carry for a very long time,” she says.

Once the honeymoon period is over though, comes the day to day reality of keeping bums on seats.

“You’re only as good as the last customer you serve,” she says. “We work hard every single day to deliver something that we love and our aim is to have our customers love that to.” ☑